THE GRAMMAR SCHOOL BACKGROUND OF CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

BY

EARL LESTER OLIVER

B. Ed., Eastern Illinois State Teachers College, 1942
A.M., University of Illinois, 1943

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

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The present study aims to contribute to a fuller understanding than has hitherto been attempted of Christopher Marlowe's grammar school education. The method employed in the investigation has been to reconstruct, with the aid of surviving records of sixteenth century grammar school curricula and procedures in general and of those of Marlowe's school in particular, the poet's grammar school background. Following this, certain evidences are pointed out of the influences of that background upon Marlowe's works, thus indicating the significance of his early education to his literary development.

In 1850 the Rev. Alexander Dyce disclosed that the name of Christopher Marlowe occurs in the Treasurer's Accounts of the King's School, Canterbury, for the year 1578-79, as one of the fifty foundation scholars maintained and educated in that school by royal decree. Dyce's discovery thus helped to bridge the hiatus in the Marlowe biography of the period from the poet's baptism to the beginning of his university career. Subsequent biographers have assumed that Marlowe's education at the King's School began about 1578-79 and continued possibly until March 1580/1, the date of his matriculation at Cambridge. The basis for this assumption is the belief that Marlowe's election to a scholarship coincided with his entrance into the King's School, and hence with the beginning of his formal grammar school training. However, there is no valid reason for supposing that Marlowe did not enter the School until he became a King's Scholar. The statutes of 1544 governing the King's School specifically require that the masters shall teach not only "those fifty boys of our church," but "all others whatsoever who come to our school to learn grammar." Furthermore, there exists definite proof that a number of town boys, or oppidans, were educated at the School, in addition to the statutory fifty Scholars supported by the Canterbury Cathedral foundation. The School was, in short, a free school which was open to all boys, regardless of whether or not they eventually qualified for election to scholarships.

Moreover, there are in Marlowe's works indications of a familiarity with certain grammar school authors and routines which were regularly taught in the King's School to students of the elementary forms, and which Marlowe would not have been likely to derive from other sources. Finally, it should be realized that Marlowe would have been insufficiently prepared to enter upon the difficult program of studies pursued in the upper forms of the King's School unless he had had the benefit of the prerequisite training provided by the lower forms of grammar school. And there is no evidence that he acquired this initial preparation elsewhere than in the early forms of the King's School, which was, in fact, the only officially recognized grammar school in Marlowe's native Canterbury during his childhood.

These facts make it necessary to revise earlier opinion concerning the grammar school education of Christopher Marlowe. It must now be accepted as a reasonably safe conjecture that Marlowe entered the King's School at the customary age, proceeded through the lower school into the upper school, and in a final stage of his grammar school career became a successful candidate for the scholarship.

The nature and extent of Marlowe's grammar school background can be determined with a fair degree of probability. The original curriculum of the King's School, drawn up in the early fifteen-forties shortly after King Henry VIII's refounding of Christchurch Cathedral, Canterbury, is outlined in a document attached to the Cathedral statutes. This information is supplemented by a statement of the seventeenth century curriculum of the school which is preserved in the School Audit of 1682. Comparison of these two forms reveals an essential homgeneity which is sufficiently marked to warrant the assumption that the course of grammar school studies pursued by Christopher Marlowe in the 'seventies differed little from that prescribed in the original curriculum of 1544. This hypothesis is further strengthened by the fact that curricula of sixteenth century Eiglish grammar schools were, for various reasons, remarkably uniform in their general content and arrangement.

The curriculum of the King's School, like all other grammar school curricula of the period, embodied a definite pedagogical

philosophy which had first been shaped in the early years of the sixteenth century by Erasmus, John Colet, and other humanists. The most significant aspect of this philosophy of grammar school education is expressed in the opening words of the statement of the curriculum attached to the Cathedral statutes of 1544, in which the aim of the School is defined. "That piety and good letters may . . . for ever blossom, grow and flower and in their time bear fruit for the glory of God and the advantage and adornment of the Commonwealth." Grammar school education was thus intended to inculcate sound Christian doctrine as well as to provide literary training. It was the literary, rather than the pietistic, aim of grammar school education which was, however, to prove the more potent influence upon Christopher Marlowe.

Not only the aim of grammar school, but the means of fulfilling that aim, especially the literary aim, was formulated by the humanistic pedagogues of the early sixteenth century. Erasmus' treatise *De Ratione Studii,* which contains a systematic exposition of objectives and methods of grammar school education, may be regarded as the source of most of the educational doctrines of the Renaissance, and as a force which largely determined the nature of the grammar school curriculum to which Christopher Marlowe was eventually exposed. According to the accepted Erasmian philosophy of education, grammar school should give the student a thorough training in the speaking and writing of the classical languages by means of an intensive program designed to perfect his prose style in these languages. Erasmus therefore proposed a select list of Latin and Greek authors which the student should read and consciously imitate. Imitation thus became fundamental to the entire grammar school program. And in order that the student might gain a maximum of benefit from the imitative process, grammar school provided a wide variety of exercises in imitation, including practice in the writing of epistles, themes, orations, and verses, upon classical models.

The curriculum of the King's School in the sixteenth century conforms closely to Erasmian ideals of grammar school education. The training in grammar equipped the student with the necessary background to begin reading and writing early in his school

career. The curriculum indicated a selection of authors to be studied and imitated by the student. And, finally, a varied compositional program insured adequate exercise in writing. The following brief summary of the grammar school training which Christopher Marlowe most likely received at the King's School in the 'seventies illustrates the way in which each of these three objectives—grammar, composition, and reading—was emphasized in the grammar school curriculum.

The King's School was patterned after Eton College, one of the most influential schools of the sixteenth century. In accordance with the Eton plan of organization, the School comprised six classes, or forms, each of which required about one year for completion. Below the first form there was an elementary class composed of students who had not yet mastered the Latin accidence in English, which was a prerequisite to entrance into the first form. The School was divided into two parts, an Upper School and a Lower School, the former including the last three forms, taught by the Head Master, and the latter including forms one through three and taught by the Usher.

Before entering the King's School, Marlowe should have acquired the fundamental skills of reading and writing in the vernacular, perhaps of the casting of accounts, and in addition should have become familiar with certain prescribed religious materials. Upon entering the School, he should have commenced with a class of beginners the study of the Latin accidence. The first form should have given him further grammatical training, the aim of which was to enable him to write simple Latin sentences, and to teach him the skills of parsing and construing. The study of the authorized Latin grammar was to continue through the remainder of the lower school, so that by the time he entered the upper school he should have become thoroughly familiar with most of the Latin grammar. In the upper school Marlowe's grammatical training should have consisted of the more advanced sections of Lily's grammar, specifically those dealing with syntax and versification. In addition, he probably began the study of Greek grammar in the upper school. Beyond the first form of the upper school, however, the study of grammar was superseded by training in rhetoric-logic, which was closely integrated with the compositional program.

Composition at the King's School while Marlowe was a student there probably consisted of the writing of simple exercises in the lower school, followed by drill in the more difficult forms at the upper levels. After he had learned from the authorized grammar how to parse and construe, and had made the first steps toward building a vocabulary from his first simple readings in Latin, he would be directed to translate easy sentences from Latin into English and from English into Latin; this kind of exercise, gradually increasing in difficulty, he would continue through the remaining forms of the lower school. In the first form of the upper school he would be given his first opportunity at more extended types of composition: the epistle, the theme, and verse. At first he would be given a *sententia* to be expanded into a short theme. Then, little by little, the themes would become longer. In the writing of themes, epistles, and verses, Marlowe would have been guided by standard rhetorical manuals of the day: Susenbrotus and Aphthonius for the theme; Erasmus for the epistle; William Lily for the technical aspects of verse-writing. As the climax to the compositional sequence, he would be expected to compose formal orations, which were to be declaimed before the school. In this highest of the compositional forms he should have exhibited the skill which he had gained from the steady drilling in precepts and practice of writing which he had experienced since he first learned to write simple sentences in Latin.

As for the classical literature which Marlowe probably studied in the King's School, the typical reading list for sixteenth century grammar schools is remarkable for its breadth and variety. If Marlowe's reading in grammar school followed the trend of such reading lists, then one may be assured that the future poet found much of interest, as well as much to which he would later have occasion to return, in the reading program of the King's School. In the first form he would have memorized William Lily's *Carmen de Moribus,* a Latin treatise on good manners which occurred regularly at the end of the first part of the authorized Latin grammar, and to which Marlowe refers in one of his plays. In the second form he would have concentrated on familiar colloquies, and here probably read the collection by Erasmus, though he might have read instead, or in addition, the

colloquies of Lucian, or Vives, or Castalio, or Corderius. In this form too he should have met the popular distichs of Cato and the fables of Aesop in Latin translation. The third form should have introduced him to Terence, Mantuan, Cicero, Sallust, and, or, Livy, and possibly to the Christian poets. In the upper school the list of authors is augmented. He most certainly would have been required to read Cicero, who by the latter part of the sixteenth century was the most popular classical writer in grammar schools; Ovid and Vergil, likewise high in favor, would also have formed an important part of his reading in the upper forms. Among Latin authors he should have met some of the following: Quintus Curtius, Martial, Catullus, Lucan, Caesar, and, of course, Horace. Possible Greek authors include Hesiod, Homer, Isocrates, and the Greek Testament.

Such is the grammar school background which the King's School should have provided for Christopher Marlowe. That he may have found this background useful when he turned to professional writing in London is indicated by allusions in his works to certain authors and routines taught in grammar school. There are several such allusions to the authorized Latin grammar, which he would probably not have read except as a grammar student. He also shows a probable knowledge of Cato, and has two references to Aesop. In his grammar school reading of an annotated edition of the eclogues of Mantuan he may have first encountered the association of Helen of Troy with the thousand ships, which was later transmuted into his most celebrated lines. His compositional training, like his reading, he also recalled: Leander's argument against chastity, in *Hero and Leander,* is patterned directly after the formal Ciceronian oration as it was regularly taught in sixteenth century grammar schools. But of greater significance than any of these echoes of his King's School background is the fact that it was grammar school which first introduced Christopher Marlowe to the classics. It was in the King's School that he probably read Ovid for the first time, and Vergil, and Lucan—three authors whom he later translated and paraphrased. Regardless of how his knowledge and appreciation of the classics may later have deepened or been modified, the ultimate source of that first knowledge and appreciation was the King's School, Canterbury. Here is a specific and concrete basis with which to begin a study of Marlowe's relation to the classics.

Whatever the results of the present study may have been, it should be remembered that they have only indicated the path which future study of Marlowe and his development can profitably follow. One must eventually return to a careful consideration of the origin of a large part of Marlowe's knowledge—his grammar school background—before one can know the full history of his evolution as a literary artist.

VITA

Earl Lester Oliver was born December 8, 1920, in Charleston, Illinois. After graduating from Eastern Illinois State Teachers College in June 1942, he entered the University of Illinois in the following September as a Scholar in English. In June 1943 he was awarded the degree of Master of Arts in English. During the summer session of 1943, the year 1943-1944, and the first semester of 1944-45, he was a Fellow in English; and in the latter year he was an Assistant and a Research Assistant in English.